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The trilogy of democracy

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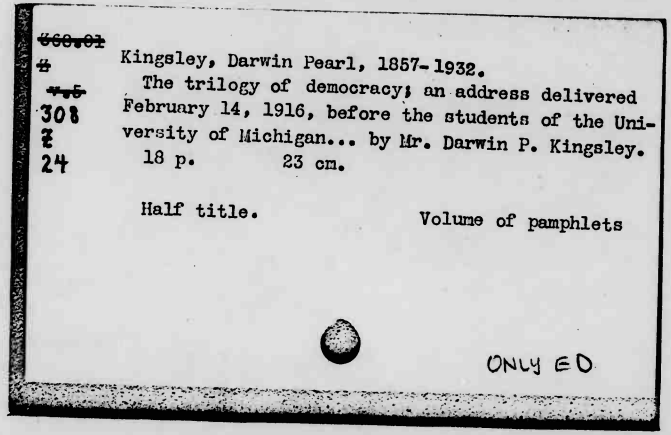

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The Trilogy of Democracy

Darwin P. Kingsley

THE TRILOGY OF DEMOCRACY

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED FEBRUARY 14, 1916, BEFORE THE STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, AND, ON EARLIER DATES, BEFORE AUDIENCES IN NEW YORK, PHILADELPHIA AND CHICAGO

BY

MR. DARWIN P. KINGSLEY

Mar. 15, 1916 13 B.

THE TRILOGY OF DEMOCRACY

In the religion and mythology of an ancient and very great people Prometheus was a Titan; he was also the friend of man. He was the remote ancestor of Benjamin Franklin; he brought fire down from Heaven. He saved the human race after Zeus had launched a destroying thunderbolt against it. He stole fire from the Gods and taught men its uses, and thereby gave humanity the means by which it could develop and elevate itself. He was the first great democrat.

Aeschylus, the first great tragic poet, tells about Prometheus and his struggles on behalf of humanity, in such fragments as survive of his great trilogy,—Prometheus Bound, Prometheus Freed, and Prometheus the Fire-Bearer. Aeschylus dealt with elemental forces, with Gods and Titans and their passions. He was a tragic poet because he handled the stuff of which tragedy is made.

Back of the visible and hideous scenes of this European war lie tragic forces which threaten not merely this or that nation, but humanity itself: a destroying thunderbolt has again been launched against it. The race more or less subconsciously understands its peril, and there are reactions now taking place in the soul of the world as unmistakable as those which shocked and changed its spiritual life in the centuries preceding and following the birth of Jesus.

These reactions are a part of the development of Democracy; their story is a part of its Trilogy—of

which two sections have now been completed. The third part, which should record Democracy's triumph, is now in the ferment of events.

The struggles of Prometheus with Zeus are singularly suggestive of the struggles in recent centuries between Democracy and established Authority. Zeus, through Strength and Force, and in punishment for what he had done, chained Prometheus to a rock in Farthest Scythia, and finally, to complete his punishment, cast him into the Abyss. But not even Zeus could destroy Prometheus; and through the surviving fragments of Prometheus Unbound we are able to see that this friend of humanity was ultimately released, and we can imagine that the text of Prometheus the Fire-Bearer—of which there is no surviving fragment—probably recorded the ultimate triumph of man and his reconciliation with Omnipotence. Prometheus the Fire-Bearer suggests the ultimate realization of the dreams of Democracy; Prometheus Bound foretells our pre-revolutionary period and all other periods of the same character; Prometheus Freed is prophetic of the unprecedented triumph of reason over prejudice that achieved the American Constitution, a triumph which now thrusts sharply upon us — its beneficiaries — the agony of Europe, where Prometheus is still fettered, where the vultures still tear at his vitals. Prometheus Bound or Freed or bearing aloft the flaming torch of Liberty typifies the struggles of Democracy through the ages.

Our Prometheus, Democracy, was driven by Strength and Force across an almost immeasurable waste of waters, farther than farthest Scythia, nearly three hundred years ago. There was need of no Hephaestus to fetter him. He was chained by poverty, by disease, by savages, by famine. The vultures of jealousy came and tore at his vitals, but he

kept alive the Divine Fire, and taught men its uses. This was the first part of the Trilogy of Democracy: This was Democracy Bound.

At the supreme moment our Prometheus rose superior to tradition and fear and ignorance and prejudice. The scales fell from his eyes and he saw! Within his then distant world, where he was free from the ambitions of dynasties and the encroachments of militarism, he performed the supreme act which points the way to the ultimate rule of Democracy, to the attainment of lasting peace; he destroyed, within his own world, the doctrine of Unconditioned Sovereignty. He made the boundaries between the Thirteen States merely convenient barriers behind which local ambitions could be developed. That achievement now controls the interstate relations of forty-eight commonwealths, although some grave questions were not finally settled until 1865.

The distinctive achievements of our Federal Union are these: not only a reassertion of the fact that sovereignty rests in the individual, but the assertion of the right of such separate sovereigns at any time to qualify the authority of the States through which their sovereignty finds expression, to create a larger state whenever they see fit, and by appropriate action again to qualify or change that.

In 1787 the people of the Western World expressed their sovereignty through thirteen separate so-called sovereign States.

In 1789 these same sovereigns qualified the separate authority of the thirteen States and subordinated them all to a new and controlling State made up of all the people and all the territory and all the possessions of all the States. They called the new State the United States of America.

For the people of all the world, or if not that then

for the people of all the Democratic States of the world, or if not that then for the people of all the English-speaking states of the world—which are all Democratic—to erect a world-state by the same processes would in principle be no new thing; and that, by such intermediate steps as are practically necessary, is the task that humanity must accomplish if it is ever to control the elements of the tragedy that lies in existing international relations, if it is to escape the stroke of the thunderbolt that has been launched against it.

This achievement of Democracy in America, its rejuvenation in Great Britain and her Colonies, its seemingly permanent triumphs in France, are the second part of the Trilogy: This is Democracy Unbound.

And now the spark secretly carried from Olympus has become a flaming torch.

To-day we are facing the third part of the Trilogy. Will that section record the realization of Democracy's Dreams? It requires some faith to say that. Can Democracy be born of Tragedy? Can Brotherhood be born of Hate? Can order come out of chaos? Can Liberty and Equality and Fraternity be the children of Death?

Who shall lead humanity out of this immeasurable disaster?

Whence is to come the inspiration which shall produce reason and the light that shall show a road?

That inspiration and that light can apparently come from but one source. Duty as well as Destiny indicate that our role in the work of redemption and salvation, our role in the section of the Trilogy which is to record Democracy's triumph, if that triumph is ever to be achieved, is that of the Light Bearer.

There is apparently no other answer to the

questions which the existing European tragedy thrusts upon us.

Tragedy may follow the on-working of uncontrollable forces, whose problems can be solved only by infinite human suffering, disaster and death; and these same forces uncontrollable in one age may be controllable in a later age. A war that is a tragedy to-day, the result of uncontrollable forces, may be a crime to-morrow. That gallant gentleman, Sir Edward Pakenham, and his equally gallant companions, who died at New Orleans two weeks after the peace of Ghent had been made, would not have died if Time and Distance had then been conquered. The forces that slew them were uncontrollable; to-day they are controllable. Such a disaster would now be not only a tragedy but a crime.

Tragedies may also be the result of controllable forces—of human weakness, of ambition, of fear, of passion. The fruits of all such tragedies are crimes.

There isn't a factor in the forces back of the European war that was uncontrollable, although one of the elements, and that the greatest, is ordinarily rated as uncontrollable and would properly be so rated but for the triumph of human reason represented by the American Union. This, therefore, is not only the most colossal war but the most colossal crime in all History—a crime so universal in its extent and so hideous in its immediate results that it ought to destroy existing standard of international relations and ought to visit an equal condemnation on certain individuals.

What ambitions, what fears, what ignorance, what passions so possessed the peoples of Europe on the first of August, 1914, that they were swept into fratricidal slaughter, looking each other in the face, touching each others hands, hearing each others voices, and

knowing in their hearts that they had no desire to wrong each other?

Why had no great nation—including our own—ever been able to think in terms other than those of its own purposes and ambitions? Why had nearly all national thinking and all national action followed selfish lines only? Why had Great Britain's thinking—rich, vast, democratic and satisfied with what she had, as she was—why had her thinking been limited to the problem of how she could keep what she had? Why did no wider vision come to her? Why did she not see the peril and the tragedy that lay in such a selfish attitude? Why had Germany thought only selfishly while developing the most marvelously efficient machine that the world had ever seen? Believing in her own efficiency, in her own greatness, why had Germany's thinking suggested no way by which that greatness could be perpetuated except through the conquest of other peoples, through the ruin of other civilizations? Why had it never occurred to England that she could not, in a world so small, keep what she had, together with her boasted control of the seas, without consulting in some serious way the wishes and ambitions of other nations? Why had no process ever appealed to Germany except that of blood and iron? There was a reason for this narrow thinking, and it was this:

The instinct of self-preservation is just as natural in nations as in individuals and animals and just as strong.

The Doctrine of Sovereignty made every nation an increasing and a deadly menace to every other nation, a menace which finally aroused everywhere the instinct of self-preservation. Arouse that instinct in a normally harmless animal and it becomes dangerous; arouse it in a man and he becomes a savage; arouse it in a nation and civilization slips

off like a cloak, the nation reverts to primitive rules in an instant and will fight to exhaustion. Alarmed by the demands of Sovereignty this instinct created what we may well call the international doctrine of the hip pocket and the six-shooter. It made Christian peoples collectively braggarts and ruffians. It created the world of diplomacy with its intrigue and lying, its conspiracies and treasons, its violated pledges and shameless doctrines of necessity.

It inevitably created a race for international advantage—advantage in population, in territory, in commerce, and ultimately in armies, and in armaments. Its sinister meaning should have been clear to all. It was clear only to a few. It had a paralyzing grip on those in authority, while the people with splendid fidelity answered blindly to the demands of a patriotism which could not see beyond its own frontiers.

When the world had so shrunk that every man could speak to every other man, when the light that comes with knowledge had flooded humanity, a strange thing happened,—a thing as elemental as any of the happenings amongst the Gods and the Titans. In the most important relations of life men suddenly lost their vision, they lost their reason, they even lost their speech; and, at the same time, they reverted in their physical relations to the level of the Stone Age. Brought face to face through the developments of science, they were able to see and understand each other clearly in all relations of life but one. As citizens, as human beings, they saw and understood all citizens of other countries; they trusted and traded with each other; they were reasonably just to each other and would have been wholly so but for the overshadowing power of the Force that could at any time make them blind and deaf and irrational.

That force was Sovereignty appealing to the ele-

mental instincts. That was the power that had limited the thinking of the nations. It built a wall higher than the atmosphere, as opaque as prejudice and passion and fear could make it all along the lines that geographically delimit nations. To every man of every nation this wall was at once as pellucid as the ether and as dark as Erebus. Every man could see and yet was blind. Through this closer touch, through this better understanding amongst the units of humanity and especially through the achievement of the American Union, a way for a solution of the tragedy that has eternally scourged the human race was clearly indicated; but so obsessed were men by the doctrine of Sovereignty that, on August 1, 1914, they proceeded on a scale so vast as to dwarf Aeschylus' conception of power, to renew and even to surpass the old slaughter. France and Germany had no physical barrier between them; neither had the other nations. They had common ties of enormous importance; their citizens moved freely about on either side of the so-called frontiers; they found each other individually just and kindly. Time and Distance, the ancient and deadly enemies of man, had been annihilated. The elements of the old tragedy were controllable. But the doctrine of Unconditioned Sovereignty which had limited their thinking made them blind and deaf, made them irrational and worse than irrational, made them savages,—all in the twinkling of an eye. Henry Jekyll did not become Mr. Hyde as quickly and as completely as the peaceful, gentle, humane, intelligent, and just citizens of Europe, became savages on August 1, 1914. And the further paradox of it lies in this: When the European citizen turned savage at the behest of Sovereignty, he at the same time rose to great spiritual heights and actually experienced unprecedented moral exaltation. He be-

came superbly, serenely brave. He dies smiling, with the approving cheers of his fellows following him into the Valley of the Shadow,—yes, even though by proper standards his hands reek with innocent blood. Measured by these tests there are no cowards anywhere in the world. All men are gloriously brave. Never in all history have the individual courage, the devotion, and the self-sacrifice of the common man shone out so splendidly. And this completes the tragedy,—that such noble qualities should be so ignobly used.

In Europe Prometheus is still fettered. The rule of Sovereignty possesses it utterly. Beyond our geographic limits it possesses us too. We are as undemocratic in international relations as any nation that ever existed. And the tragedy of it is that we must be so until the lines that delimit nations have no more significance than the lines that separate the States of our Union.

The situation in Europe threatens us; Sovereignty threatens us: because while we have a law under which forty-eight States can live together, Europe has no law under which her States can live together and we have no law under which our Union and the States of Europe can live together. We ought to have, but Unconditioned Sovereignty denies it; Unconditioned Sovereignty, whose sinister power can make even us blind and mad. Unconditioned Sovereignty threatens us. Because of that threat, we are demanding that Washington prepare — there seems to be no other sane thing to do. Prepare to do what? Primarily of course to defend ourselves, but secondarily to re-create a condition under which our national boundaries shall become a wal through which we cannot see, behind which,—not beyond which, let us hope,—we may become as mad as any. How we hate it! As we make

this demand, we feel that we have compromised ourselves, that we have parted with some measure of our most precious possession, — our self-respect. Preparation with us as with every true Democracy is indeed a necessity only a little less hideous than war itself.

If to prepare—which at best is a patriotic reversion to barbarism—is all we are to do, we might well conclude that Plymouth Rock and Jamestown have lost their inspiration and meaning, that Lexington and Ticonderoga and Yorktown and Appomattox mark no advance. But preparation is not all—it must not be all. The necessity which demands preparation presents also a supreme duty. Not to discharge that duty, not to try at least to discharge it, will be to shirk our natural role and to fail humanity in a great crisis. As we demand that Washington take whatever steps are necessary for our adequate defense, we should demand that those steps be so taken that our brothers in Europe and in all the world shall at the same time understand this: that as yet we are neither blind nor dumb nor mad; that we hate war and all its hideous fruits; that we have no enmity against them; that we know a better method than war; that these forty-eight Commonwealths, having a territory as large as all of Europe outside Asiatic Russia and a population as great as that territory had a hundred years ago, have been freed and we believe that through the wise exercise of the authority that freed them Europe may be freed, and ultimately all the world may be freed. Our duty and opportunity lies in this:—

WE MUST BREAK DOWN THE WALLS OF UNCONDITIONED SOVEREIGNTY. BY NO OTHER PROCESS CAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE.

By no other process can the heroic, god-like qualities of the common man be applied to his elevation, and not eternally to his destruction; by no other process can these qualities be redeemed from their present savage and internecine misuse; by no other process can the elements of this tragedy be controlled.

If we assume the role of Prometheus the Fire-Bearer in the third section of Democracy's Trilogy, the leadership in that colossal task is ours.

Since Prometheus brought fire from Heaven, no greater opportunity has faced men.

No form of government can long survive that does not give security to life and property. That is axiomatic. In the present constitution of this little world, ruled by the Doctrine of Sovereignty with its elemental appeal, the nation that would survive must be ready to fight. That is an admission which the citizens of a democracy make reluctantly, hesitantly, and shame-facedly. But we must face the facts. The citizens of a democracy naturally feel that they have moved in their ideals, their methods, and their purposes, beyond the savagery of such methods. But have they? Is there under the rule of Sovereignty so much less likelihood of trouble between democracies than there is of trouble between democracies and other forms of government? To be specific: Is there so much less possibility after all of trouble between the United States and Great Britain than there is of trouble between the United States and Germany? The same barbarism rules international relations in each case. If the thinking of the United States and Great Britain is more sympathetic and similar, it is because of a common origin and not because either nation is disposed at all to take down the cruel and dangerous barrier which divides them. They may think alike on

either side of the barrier, but the barrier remains. The Doctrine of Sovereignty and the principles of Democracy are irreconcilable. Both cannot permanently survive in the same world.

In international relations democracies are at a disadvantage even in times of peace: they despise lying. In times of war they are certain to play a pathetic part: when sovereignty orders the citizens of a democracy to march out and kill men who have never consciously done them wrong, men who are by nature endowed with the same inalienable rights which the citizens claim for themselves, they obey, but they are ashamed, and for a time at least they do their work badly.

Democracies will not be true democracies until they apply their own principles of government to international relations, until by the creation of an effective union of democratic nations they banish the savagery of sovereignty and the monstrous inefficiencies of so-called international law.

Until such a Union is achieved we must be prepared to defend ourselves; but as we prepare, what other things should we do? After all our glorious history, after our Declaration about man's inalienable rights, after our solemn assertions that all men—not Americans only, but *all* men—are created equal, have we no peculiar responsibility at this time? Must we just get ready and march out and sink into the ruck and horror of human slaughter? Is that the whole of the problem? I submit, in the light of our professions and our history, that humanity has the right to expect something more than that from us. Humanity has reached the hour when it is asking for a new Order and is listening for the voice of the Prophet who is to herald its coming. If the close of this war is not to be the hour of deliverance, who shall say that de-

liverance will ever come? If we are not the people to speak, then from whence in all the world shall the voice of deliverance be heard? Shall we by preparation for defense and by silence express our belief that deliverance through a new Order is impossible? Do we believe that this European slaughter is a part of the Order of Nature, and not to be avoided? Is the impulse which makes men love their country born of Evil? Must it forever bring in a harvest of tears?

Let us be candid: When the Roman Augurs, around the beginning of this Era, in obedience to the ritual of their religion examined the entrails of animals in order to learn what the future was to be and then told the people, they at last reached the point where the absurdity of the process penetrated even their consciousness and they laughed in each other's faces. They finally knew themselves for the tricksters and liars that they were. But the people for centuries willingly sacrificed their lives under the direction of these Augurs with the same fine fidelity that rules the peoples of Europe to-day. The loud assertion by great commanders on both sides of this war that they have direct knowledge of the Divine purpose and assurance of Divine approval has in it a note which suggests the ribald laughter of their Roman predecessors. These modern Augurs are the High Priests of Sovereignty. They (and we in so far as we concur) are betraying the people in order to support the established order. The established order must be supported; but this is not the way to support it, this is the way to destroy it.

When in 1788 our fathers created a larger State, they did not destroy the established order; they destroyed disorder: they did not destroy the integrity of any of the thirteen states; on the contrary they

gave to each a vastly enlarged outlook and a broader spiritual assurance. They gave patriotism a new meaning.

The United States of America was then not a fact but a thought, not a geographic entity, but a vision: it lay like a new Heaven and a new Earth all about the thirteen states but was visible only to men of vision. Washington saw it, and Madison and Jay and Franklin and, most vividly of all, Hamilton saw it.

Into the larger world which enveloped them, which they dimly saw and seeing dimly greatly feared, the people were induced finally to go—partly through fear, partly by persuasion, chiefly by the power of masterful leadership.

Since the young Christ stood in the Temple and disputed with the Doctors, the world has seen no more inspiring and heroic figure than the stripling Hamilton in the summer of 1788 fighting the forces of reaction and fear almost alone and finally bringing New York into the Union.

The United English Nations is to-day only a thought, a vision; but as against the menace of Sovereignty its suggestion enfolds the English-speaking states like a benediction.

We have seen a vision crystallize into a great political fabric: we have seen a dream become the most practical and prophetic fact in human government.

We now see another and a nobler vision: it pictures the solidarity of the English Nations, it tells us that they are to-day divided only by a political fiction; that in their united action lies the only hope that Democracy's Dreams will be realized. They are one in language, one in sympathy, one in traditions, one in principles, one in standards of justice, one in ideals. The foundations of a Democratic Government so vast

that it could compel peace are already securely laid if the English world shall now arise and make the vision a reality.

Is there to-day somewhere a Prophet who shall yet stand in a Congress of English-speaking nations—a Congress similar to that which met in Independence Hall in the summer of 1787—and say as Washington did on the opening day: "Let us raise a standard to to which the wise and the honest can repair; the event is in the hand of God"? Are there Madisons and Jays and Hamiltons to plead for the acceptance of the Order which that Congress would foreshadow?

The opportunity is greater than in 1787, the need is more dire, the task is easier, the issue no less certain.

The larger English Nation which could be so created would do for its units what the United States has done on this continent. It would bring the "Federation of the World" within the realm of probabilities.

Prepare for war? Yes, we must.

BUT ARE WE GREAT ENOUGH AT THE SAME TIME TO PLEAD FOR PEACE? ARE WE STRONG ENOUGH TO LEAD IN THE MOVEMENT WHICH MUST ULTIMATELY UNITE THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING STATES OF THE WORLD, IF THE GLORIOUS ANGLO-SAXON TRADITION IS TO SURVIVE, IF DEMOCRACY AND NOT THE DOCTRINE OF SOVEREIGNTY IS TO PREVAIL?

If we essay the part of Prometheus the Fire-Bearer, let us not too much doubt the potency of our example. Our brothers in Europe may be blind and deaf and mad, as we once were, as we may be again. But there is a great sadness in their hearts and a great hope. They are waiting, as the world was waiting nineteen hundred years ago. They expect deliverance. They cannot deliver themselves. Sovereignty holds

them bound and helpless. The vultures of war still tear at their vitals. They are as heroic as Titans and as weak as children. Giants in their own strength, they are bound by Lilliputians. They are not enemies, but the Doctrine of Sovereignty has made them believe they are. They do not hate each other, no, not even when in obedience to orders they slay each other. They are confused and bewildered. They are killing each other by millions, and they know not why.

Therefore as we prepare to defend ourselves let us also speak to them. And as we speak let us pray: That even as the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, when the earth was without form and void and said: Let there be Light and there was Light—so may our united voices, charged with Sympathy and the spirit of Human Brotherhood creatively penetrate the horror that hangs over Europe, and carry to those who are now in darkness the great Light that first came to us one hundred and twenty-seven years ago.

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